NURTURING DEMOCRACY IN AFRICA:

THIRTEEN LESSONS FROM THE FIELD

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The lessons address three overlapping concerns: (1) the inherent nature of the exercise; (2) the implications of the nature of the exercise for its implementation; (3) the role of the exercise in the overall conduct of US foreign policy.

The views expressed in this paper are solely the responsibility of the author. Readers familiar with the basic content of USAID's program to support democratization in Africa may skip to page 3

BACKGROUND

Since mid-1991, the Africa Bureau of USAID, in consultation with the Africa Bureau of the Department of State, has mounted an array of programs to nurture transitions to democratic rule and improve the quality of governance. These interventions in support of "DG" have been comprised mainly of the following:[1]

* A small number of comprehensive, multi-year, and well financed projects to nurture democratic transitions in selected African countries (e.g. Ethiopia, Mozambique and Zambia).

* An expanded portfolio of small grants ($10,000 to $100,000) funded under section 116e of the Foreign Assistance Act to promote human rights in most countries where the USG maintains a USAID mission.

* An expanded effort, supported by the African Regional Election Assistance Fund (AREAF) or by country democracy and governance projects to support the holding of democratic elections (e.g. Angola, Cameroon, Ethiopia, Ghana, Kenya, Lesotho and Mozambique).

The basic objectives of these programs and the assumptions on which they rest have been well articulated, and need only be summarized here:[2] to nurture the emergence across Africa of accountable, pluralistic, tolerant, and transparent systems of governance which protect the basic human rights of their citizens. Political systems which exhibit these qualities are regarded by the United States as universally desirable and applicable to all peoples.

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[1] In addition to these programs, USAID has, in some countries worked closely with USIS to arrange lectures, workshops, study tours, etc. in support of democratic values. While not explicitly part of the DG initiative, the USAID country program in South Africa, launched in 1986 under the Comprehensive Anti-Apartheid Act, might well be regarded as the first DG country program on the continent.

[2] USAID Policy: Democracy and Governance (U.S. Agency for International Development, November, 1991) and National Research Council, Democratization in Africa: African Views, African Voices (Washington: National Academy Press, 1992).

Such political systems are also regarded as supportive to the development of prosperous market based economies. This is particularly in Africa where structural adjustment reforms have slowed in the absence of corresponding political and institutional reform.

To design and implement appropriate programmatic interventions in support of these objectives, the Africa Bureau of USAID created the Office of New Initiatives in September, 1991 with a small three person sub-office (AFR/ONI/DG) charged with mounting initiatives in this area. Moving rapidly, ONI/DG had, by mid-1992, established the basic parameters and infrastructure for the program through the following actions.

* A review of the multiple meanings of democracy in the African context, and the prospective role of the US in nurturing democratic transitions, through the sponsorship of four conferences organized by the National Academy of Sciences--the first attended mainly by American academic specialists on Africa; the remaining three mainly by African social scientists.

* The signing of a cooperative agreement with ARD Associates Inc. to provide relevant social science expertise and technical assistance to assess the options for specific programmatic interventions in selected countries.

* The signing of a companion cooperative agreement with Checchi Associates and Howard University to provide legal expertise and technical assistance to advance the rule of law.

* The appointment of a Senior Governance Advisor resident in Washington to direct the program mounted by ARD in cooperation with AFR/ONI/DG and selected USAID missions in Africa.

* The appointment of a regional democracy and governance advisor for Eastern and Southern Africa, and a commitment to appoint a similar advisor for West Africa.

* The writing of a strategy statement setting forth the guidelines for the overall operation of the DG program in the Africa Bureau of USAID, and for the design of DG projects by USAID missions in the field.

* Commencement and completion of designs for major governance projects in Ethiopia, Mozambique and Zambia, and the posting of a country DG advisor to Ethiopia.

* The negotiation of a cooperative agreement with the African American Institute (AAI), the International Republican Institute (IRI), and the National Democratic Institute (NDI) to mount a program of electoral support funded by the African Regional Election Assistance Fund (AREAF), and tne subsequent provision of technical assistance in this area by the three parties to this agreement.

Space does not permit further description of these interventions. Rather my purpose is to set forth several propositions regarding the lessons learned to date from these activities. Readers interested in more information on the specific initiatives undertaken by the Africa Bureau to nurture democratization should contact AFR/ONI/DG at USAID.

LESSONS LEARNED

The basic concern of this writer that the DG initiative in Africa has made a good start, but is beginning to founder because of several constraints which impinge upon the implementation of the program in the field. Due to the highly political nature of the DG program, and the fact that democratization has become a more integral part of US foreign policy, there must also be a better interface and consistency between USAID and the Department of State in respect to the role of DG initiatives in the conduct of our bilateral relations in Africa, and indeed around the world.

Lesson 1: Do not reinvent the conceptual wheel.

The basic conceptualization of, and requisites for, democracy are well-known as are most of the programmatic interventions available to USAID. Any effort to reorganize and expand US initiatives in support of democratic transitions in Africa and other regions need not begin from scratch. Rather

the need is to "take stock" of the interventions attempted to date to determine which work, which do not, and why.

In arguing that the basic conceptualization and requisites for democracy are well-known, I make the following assumptions:

* That a functioning democracy requires the establishment of a configuration of public and private institutions of countervailing power that link the rulers of a political system to the ruled, that periodically provide the ruled with the opportunity to change their rulers by majority vote, and that do not infringe upon the exercise of basic human rights. As such, the nurturing of democracy is inherently an exercise in institution building.

* That a functioning democracy requires the establishment in society of a supportive political culture which stresses the values of accountability, transparency, accommodation and compromise, and without which democratic institutions are unlikely to function. As such, the nurturing of democracy is also inherently an exercise in political socialization.

* Democratic institutions and political culture are most likely to be established in societies where there has been a significant measure of economic development, and especially in those societies where such development has led to the emergence of a middle-class. As such, the nurturing of democracy is inextricably linked to economic development but the precise sequencing, particularly in Africa, is not known.

In sum, we know the broad parameters of what needs to be done to nurture democracy--the establishment of constitutional rule, a competitive electoral system, a functioning representative legislature, a critical and free press, a vibrant civil society, etc. The challenge, is putting theory into practice--to design an appropriate mix of specific interventions on a country by country basis, and to implement these interventions in a manner that advances and is consistent with US foreign policy objectives.

Lesson 2: Nurturing democracy will take time; progress will be uneven.

Given the inherent nature of the process of democratization, nurturing democracy will take time. The time horizons for measuring progress in this

area are decades and half-decades--longer than the average presidential administration. Progress, especially when measured at the country level, will be halting, and experience many ups and downs. The central question which must be answered by both USAID and State is whether the United States is prepared to commit itself to the long haul--both in terms of our foreign policy, and in respect to a modest yet steady and appropriate flow of resources to support interventions in support of democratization in the field.

Lesson 3: Nurturing democracy requires much more (and much "less") than facilitating transitional elections in countries emerging from authoritarian rule.

While transitions to democracy ultimately require the regular holding of "free and fair" elections, the holding of an initial "transitional" election does not by itself guarantee the establishment of democratic rule. This point is clearly demonstrated by recent electoral experience in Africa (Angola, Cameroon, Ethiopia, Ghana, Kenya, Senegal and even Zambia).[3] Democratic electoral practices, like democratic political systems, are not created overnight but evolve over many years. Democratic electoral practices are also but one component of a democratic polity, and cannot be sustained without the establishment of related institutions and a political culture supportive of democratic rule.

Given these realities, USAID should devote a greater proportion of its DG resources to laying the groundwork for democratic elections and consolidating the gains from elections, rather than to supporting the mere

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[3]See "Final Report: Workshop on Lessons Learned in Providing Electoral Assistance to Africa," (Washington: U.S. Agency for International Development and U.S. Department of State, January 26, 1993).

holding of elections. Such a shift will entail a greater emphasis on longer-term interventions such as civic and voter education, assistance to the development of political parties, strengthening the operation of electoral commissions, nurturing civil society, establishing a free press, and strengthening legislative institutions. While USAID should continue to support the observation of transitional elections, it should devote relatively less effort to this area and/or alter the nature of electoral support to focus more on the period leading up to elections, and especially the period after.[4]

Lesson 4: Nurturing democracy will NOT require significant increases in expenditure.

Present DG programs being mounted in Eastern and Southern Africa are adequately funded. Indeed, in some countries (e.g. where there are parallel DG programs by other donors) current US programs may be slightly overfunded in respect to local capacity to efficiently absorb support.

Lesson 5: DG programs at the country level need not be large, but they must be flexible and multi-faceted in content.

Most specific DG interventions (e.g. constitutional reform, civic education, strengthening the legislature, assistance to the press, election support) are relatively small in terms of dollar cost ($10,000 to $2 million), but an effective DG program at the country level usually requires that several complementary interventions be pursued at the same time. The "portfolio" of specific interventions, moreover, must be periodically adjusted to match evolving political conditions in the host country.

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[4] Ibid.

Lesson 6: Though not costly in terms of total expenditure, DG programs are inherently "personnel intensive".

Because democratization is inherently an exercise in institution building, and because effective DG projects at the country level normally consist of a portfolio of relatively small interventions, the entire exercise is necessarily "personnel intensive" relative to the amounts of money spent.

* DG programs require the continuous presence of appropriate specialists in the field. Large and multi-faceted projects (e.g. Ethiopia, Mozambique, Zambia) require the permanent presence of a country DG advisor to oversee the implementation of the program. Given the political nature of these programs, and the fact that they are mounted in the context of an ever-changing milieu, the role of the country DG advisor is often one of constantly brokering new arrangements for the implementation of projects--between the USAID mission and agencies of the host government, between the USAID mission and the US Embassy, between the USAID mission and other donors, and between various organizations both public and private in the host country. While some of this oversight can be provided intermittently by the REDSO DG advisors, they are no substitute for the day-to-day presence of an in-country advisor.

* Many DG interventions cannot be implemented through the usual 1-3 week consultancies supplied by NGOs or firms which have signed cooperative agreements with USAID to provide technical assistance to DG projects. For example, civic education and election monitoring projects are most effective if they are implemented over a period of months rather than weeks. Such implementation, however, requires that consultant support be provided for much longer periods than is typically the practice.

* Because DG projects are multi-faceted in content, a typical DG country project requires that many small amounts of money be obligated on a continuous basis--to local institutions, for consultants brought in from the outside, etc. However, USAID's procedures for obligating funds are so complex and time consuming that until such procedures are simplified, each DG program should be assigned a full-time project manager or an institutional contractor to assist USAID missions to obligate funds in a timely manner. Put simply, several of our best designed initiatives are being crippled or slowed, because the missions in which they operate cannot provide adequate administrative personnel to obligate the funds. Such delays undermine the credibility of DG programs. Indeed, this is the most serious constraint on the implementation of DG programs in the field.

Lesson 7: Nurturing democratization requires not only adequate numbers of personnel but quality personnel.

It should also be recognized that the experience of DG to date within the Africa Bureau of USAID has been mixed in respect to the quality of personnel attracted to the task. Generally speaking, the most productive staff have been "outsiders"--either young and enthusiastic newcomers to the Agency, or PSCs. The explanations are primarily two. First, the exercise demands a high measure of relevant social science and/or technical expertise that is to be found mainly at American universities or a small number of specialized NGOs (i.e. NDI) rather than inside USAID. Second, the present evaluation and reward system within USAID does not encourage "the best and the brightest" within the Agency to commit themselves to accepting an assignment to administer DG programs because they are inherently risky, highly political, outside the area of specialization of most career employees, and small in terms of budget. Putting in hard, and even creative work, may not yield the desired results, in which case one may not necessarily be rewarded for one's efforts. This suggests that if USAID is to attract its best personnel to its DG programs, more thought must be given to what incentives can be provided to those prepared to join in the exercise.

Alternatively, the Agency must recognize that it will need to continue to rely heavily on PSCs, NGOs, and consultant firms to implement its DG programs with the attendant problems that such reliance brings. Such reliance, however, incurs other costs that should not be minimized. NGOs and consultant firms cannot always provide appropriate personnel for sufficiently long periods in the field. NGOs also insist on maintaining a measure of independence from the USG which can pose problems in an area of activity that

is becoming a more integral part of US foreign policy.[5] Put succinctly, an overreliance on NGOs, especially via cooperative agreements which guarantee NGOs a large measure of independence, runs the risk of surrendering partial control over the implementation of US foreign policy to the NGO.

Lesson 8: Given the inherent nature of DG initiatives, USAID must make several changes in the way it conducts its business if it is to be successful in implementing programs in this area.

Because of its cumbersome operating procedures and declining OE budget, USAID operates best when it moves funds in large lumps for projects that are relatively homogeneous in content and repetitive in terms of the nature of the exercise (e.g. distributing condoms for the prevention of AIDS). Effective DG programs, however, are just the opposite on all counts--they are heterogeneous, they require much "hands-on" administration, and they are relatively small and ever-changing. Dealing with these realities will require that USAID rethink its present allocation of appropriate personnel to DG if it is to mount a successful world-wide effort in this area.

USAID must also rethink and perhaps modify the terms of reference it sets for NGOs and consultant firms on which it draws for technical assistance. As indicated above, heavy reliance on NGOs and consultants can involve costs of both a logistical and policy nature that constrain efforts to nurture DG.

Most important, it must rethink--indeed rewrite--its procedures for obligating relatively small amounts of money. This may mean providing USAID missions, and/or country DG advisors with greater discretionary authority to obligate funds. It certainly means simplifying the procedures for relatively

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[5]The experience of NGO activity supported by the African Regional Election Fund, especially the mounting of "American led" (but not US government) missions to observe transitional elections, is an example.

small disbursements, because the current system does not work. It is important to note that USAID is at a significant disadvantage vis a vis other donors when it comes to rapidly disbursing funds for DG interventions.[6] This is particularly disappointing, because compared to other donors, USAID has a much better intellectual and technical understanding of what interventions to pursue.

Lesson 9: Although USAID must improve the administration of its DG programs, the United States is presently the world leader in DG.

Notwithstanding the need to refine its programs in support of democratization, USAID and the United States is presently the world leader in what is a very new area of technical assistance. While a core group of other donors--Canada, Germany, the Netherlands, the Scandinavian countries, and (to a much lesser extent) the United Kingdom--have begun to mount their own programs in this area, none have thought through the conceptual challenges of DG to the extent of the US. Nor, except for Germany, have other donors committed resident specialists to the field to support their programs. Some donors such as Denmark and Sweden are beginning to match, and even surpass USAID expenditures on DG, but they are unabashed in their pleas to the US to "tell us what to do." Put differently, DG is an area of foreign assistance in which the US is achieving far more impact and influence than that derived from its own programs. This has been particularly true in respect to the monitoring of transitional elections, but is now extending to DG interventions

[6] In this regard, the Africa Bureau, and indeed the Agency, would do well to examine and learn from the procedures pursued by the USAID mission South Africa in making over 400 obligations a year to implement what in retrospect was the first major DG project on the continent. Indeed, the South Africa mission is already planning to conduct such an examination as part of its evaluation of its program since 1986.

which focus on the fundamentals of institution building and the development of a political culture in support of democracy.

Lesson 10: The significance and place of democratization as an objective of US foreign policy must be clarified relative to other objectives.

* Because DG programs operate within the overall context of US foreign policy, the objectives of US foreign policy in respect to democratization must be clearly defined. Efforts to mount DG programs will lack credibility to the extent that other foreign policy objectives supersede our commitment to democratization. On the other hand, it is unrealistic to expect that the objective of democratization can always be ranked at the top of the foreign policy agenda. It is therefore important to articulate when democratization is at the top of the US agenda, and when it is not.[7]

* The formulation of a set of policy guidelines on democratization should include the articulation of a single set of international standards via which the USG will measure which nations are making progress towards democratization, and which are not. While it is true that the assessment of a country's performance must consider its "starting point" on the road to democratization, low starting points (e.g. in Ethiopia) cannot be used as an excuse for no progress towards democratization, or the maintenance of a low international ranking over an extended period. The use of different standards or scales for measuring progress towards democratization in different countries should also be discouraged as such a practice will make it difficult to compare countries. Multiple standards should only be used to assess different dimensions of democratization (e.g. freedom of the media, freedom of association, human rights, political accountability), but the same standard for each dimension should be applied to all cases.

* There is a need to clarify existing policy in respect to how country rankings and/or progress on democratization will serve as the basis of political conditionality for economic assistance. It is important that the applications of tests of political conditionality be both consistent and nuanced as any blanket withholding of assistance could undermine the process of democratization in some countries. Withholding assistance from countries which "fail" the test of political conditionality should be done on a selective basis by making distinctions between the withholding and of "quick disbursing aid," disaster and famine relief, non-DG project assistance, and DG project assistance.

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[7] This writer is fully sensitive to the fact that such guidelines may well limit flexibility, and that some will argue that the USG should maintain a measure of ambiguity on the matter.

Lesson 11: The nurturing of democracy in the field requires close coordination between the USAID mission and the U.S. Embassy.

Given the highly political nature of DG programs, there must be close and continuous coordination in the field between the AID mission and the Embassy while recognizing these are different entities with distinctive roles to play.

* Without exception (in Eastern and Southern Africa), the most effective DG programs have been mounted in those countries where there is a close, indeed relaxed relationship between the USAID mission and the Embassy, and where the U.S. ambassador and AID mission director have taken a personal interest in the exercise. Conversely, DG initiatives have been less successful or non-existent where such a relationship and level of interest have not been established. The boundaries between the Embassy and the USAID mission in this area are necessarily blurred. While the USAID mission is the principal implementing agency for DG interventions, it must mount its programs consistent with US foreign policy. Conversely, missions frequently contribute to the clarification of US foreign policy through the specific interventions they support (e.g. election observation).

* It is sometimes argued that nurturing democracy should be the responsibility of the Embassy, while improving governance should be the responsibility of USAID. Such a division of labor is artificial--both conceptually and operationally--and will not work. "Democracy" and "governance" are not mutually exclusive phenomena. Nor are most embassies equipped--in terms of staff or funding--to mount democratization programs independently.[8]

Lesson 12: More thought should be given to how the United States coordinates its efforts to nurture democratization with those of other donors.

Because democratization is a universal value, because other donor countries are beginning to mount their own DG initiatives, and because the US is the world leader in this area, it is often desirable for the United States to coordinate its activities with countries which share our objectives to more

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[8] While one can conceive of a high level of governance without democracy, one cannot conceive of democracy without governance. See, for example, Joel D. Barkan, "What Went Wrong With African Governance?", a paper prepared for the African Governance Committee of the World Bank, August, 1990 and Robert Charlick, "Governance Working Paper," prepared for the Africa Bureau of USAID, January, 1992

effectively convey the importance of democratization to countries still under authoritarian rule. Coordination is particularly desirable in cases where economic assistance becomes tied to progress on democratization as different donors make independent evaluations of how much progress has been achieved. Coordination is also desirable where countries resisting democratization believe that they can ignore American concerns, because others concerned about democratization will be "more flexible" in acting on their evaluations.

* Coordination has been particularly desirable and effective in respect to the international observation of "transitional elections", but such coordination often commences much later than what is optimal.

* Coordination in monitoring and nurturing the continuous flow of the day-to-day events that determine whether a country is making real progress in respect to democratization may be more desirable than coordination of the monitoring of elections which are intermittent events. Support for press freedom, the protection of human rights, and the development of civil society are particularly important.

* To encourage coordination, the United States should seek to promote more frequent consultations between relevant USG bureaus charged with advancing US policy on democratization and their counterparts in governments which have made democratization an objective of their foreign policies. Coordination should also be encouraged between US based NGOs active in nurturing democratization and counterpart NGOs abroad.

* Because coordination is most effective when it is maintained in the field, the United States should encourage the formation of working groups on DG in selected countries where other diplomatic missions share our concerns.

Lesson 13: <u>Because "democracy" is a universal value and a global objective of US foreign policy, USAID programs to nurture democratization should be formulated on a global and comparative basis</u>.

Whether there should be a single bureau or office within USAID, the Department of State, or elsewhere in the Federal government to oversee DG initiatives around the world, or whether these initiatives should continue to be pursued on a region by region basis involves both conceptual and

administrative issues. As suggested above, there is a need for greater coordination, perhaps centralization, in respect to the conceptual issue of where the nurturing of democracy stands in the overall scheme of U.S. foreign policy. The process of democratization and how to nurture it--what interventions work and which do not--is also best understood through comparative analysis that is not limited artificially by region. For example, several lessons from recent the democratic transitions in Latin America are relevant to the African experience. How ethnic conflict might be contained through the establishment of federal institutions is also a question that is best explored by comparing experiences from different regions (i.e. Africa, India and the NIS).

Actual administration and implementation of specific DG interventions, however, are fundamentally activities which take place in the field and which must be tailored to local conditions. While DG interventions must be supported by a clear policy emanating from Washington, the nurturing of democracy, like democracy itself is inherently a "bottom-up" activity. The recruitment and posting of appropriate personnel to design and implement DG interventions, the obligation of funds in support of these activities, etc. will are best done via the continued operation of USAID missions abroad. While one can easily conceive of a single DG office for all of USAID, or for USAID and State, the question of how such an office will interface with the field, and the role of the regional bureaus in this exercise, must be given much thought.